

Sufism *in* America

Text by ANJUM NAIM
Photographs by LEE GUTHRIE

**Immigrant teachers,
travel books and
translated poetry spread
Sufi thought and ritual.**



SEMA, THE RITUAL DANCE

The *Sema*, symbolizing universal values of love and service, is performed only by the Order of the Whirling Dervishes, one branch of the vast Sufi tradition of Islam. The ritual dance consists of several stages with different meanings:

- Naat-I-Sherif, a eulogy to the “Messenger of Islam” and all prophets before him.
- A drumbeat symbolizing the divine command “Be” for the creation of the universe.
- A *Taksim*, an improvisation on the reed flute, expressing the divine breath, which gives life to everything.
- The *Sultan Veled* procession, accompanied by *peshrev* music; a circular, anticlockwise procession three times around the turning space.
- During the *Sema* there are four selams, or musical movements, each with a distinct rhythm. At the beginning, during and close of each selam, the song praises God.
- A recitation from the Quran.
- The salute. The dervish demonstrates the number “1” in his appearance—arms humbly crossed—and by this, the unity of God.
- A prayer for the peace of the souls of all the prophets and believers.

The whirl stops and the white skirts of the dervishes, which had flared like parasols, settle in their normal pattern. The mesmerizing dance, driven by boundless spiritual energy, has ended with the fourth *salaam*, or invocation to peace. The audience heaves a sigh, as the spell is broken for a moment.

Then begins a soulful chant: “Unto God belong the East and West, and whithersoever ye turn, ye are faced with Him. He is All-embracing, All-knowing.”

This Sufi ceremony, or encounter with the divine, did not occur in Turkey or Afghanistan, but in Houston, Texas. A friend and I were the only two non-white, non-American folk in the audience. Together, all of us were on a journey to a special place in the soul.

The dance and the ritual is known as *Sema*, an old Sufi practice associated with the 13th-century Persian poet Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi, who was born in Balkh, Afghanistan. Each detail of dress and every gesture is loaded with significance. The tall cap on the dancer’s head symbolizes a tomb under which the ego is buried.

Sema is the pilgrim’s progress toward perfection and the realization of the ultimate truth. It is considered an ascent to the higher self through absolute, unconditional love. Returning from this inward travel, an individual feels he has become the beloved of the entire creation, acceptable to and adored by all. The Sufi

who attains such perfection believes he has risen above denominational squabbles, racial ill will, lust for worldly gain and parochial pettiness.

After the dance ended, I was curious as to how the United States had become the home for such a spiritual quest. I had grown up in India with the image of an America peopled by Christians and Jews only, although people of other faiths, from Native Americans to Chinese workers and other immigrants, had lived there for centuries. The picture started to change further in the early 20th century as more faiths from the East, including Islam, began to influence daily life and attitudes in the United States.

The first Muslim immigrants, from 1878 to 1924, were laborers from Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Those who stayed concen-

From left: Indian sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan started the Sufi Order in the West, now called the Sufi Order International; Murshid Samuel L. Lewis was a forerunner of unitive mystical experience; Pir Shabda Kahn is the director of the Chishti Sabri School of Music in California.



Photographs courtesy Shabda Kahn

Persian Poet Rumi Conquers America

By STEVE HOLGATE

He is the most popular poet in the United States. Barely known here only a decade ago, classes on his work have sprouted up on university campuses throughout the country. Community lectures and public readings of his poetry are announced in the cultural sections of newspapers in virtually every major American city. In perhaps the ultimate measure of his celebrity, a group of movie stars and singers has made a recording of his poems.

Has the United States produced another celebrative poet like Walt Whitman, to sing America's song? Another Robert Frost, the flinty New Englander, to speak to the half-realized yearnings of our souls?

In fact, this poet is not an American at all. Nor can Americans hope to see him in a local lecture hall or on the television chat circuit; he has been dead for more than 700 years. And, if his name has been familiar in the United States for only a short time, Iranians have held him close to their collective heart for centuries. He is Jelaluddin Rumi of Balkh, better known in the United States simply as Rumi.

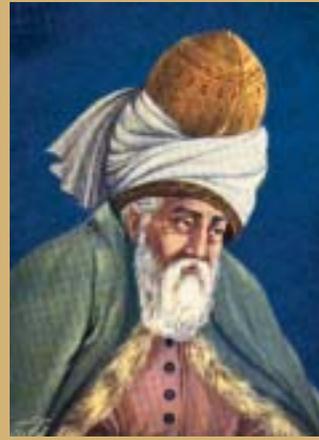
Over the last 10 years, say several sources, Rumi has sold more volumes than any other poet in the United States. An Internet search of his name results in

more than 800,000 citations. Rumi calendars, coffee mugs, even T-shirts have appeared on college campuses and in bookshops around the country.

Yet, despite these hallmarks of typical pop culture celebrity, it would be wrong to trivialize Rumi's success in the United States or to think that his words, though grounded in Islamic tradition, do not address the needs and concerns of many Americans.

Phyllis Tickle, an editor with the American periodical *Publisher's Weekly*, says that Rumi's popularity in the United States "is a matter of our enormous spiritual hunger." Coleman Barks, the Tennessee-born poet, whose translations of Rumi have been the greatest factor in the poet's popularity in the United States, speaks in a similar vein when he says that the religiously ecstatic nature of Rumi's poetry resonates in Americans seeking this very quality. Rumi's poetic question, "Where do I come from and what am I supposed to be doing?" speaks to countless Americans who have a strong spiritual sense.

Since the attacks of 9/11, a number of commentators have also made the point that Rumi has served as an important bridge between Americans and Islam.



Courtesy Shahmir Shahmiri

Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi

No one has been more instrumental in Americans' increasing awareness of Rumi than his leading American translator. James Fadiman, an American scholar, has said, "The secret of Rumi's popularity in the United States is Coleman Barks." The publication of Barks' 1995 volume, *The Essential Rumi*, more than any other event, sparked America's interest in the great Persian-language poet.

In a recent interview, Barks indicated that his mission to translate the works of Rumi began in an unlikely way. "I had never heard of him," he says, before the noted American

writer, Robert Bly, handed him a volume of Rumi's poetry in 1976, written in a leaden, academic translation—its only English translation at the time—and said to Barks, "These poems need to be released from their cages."

Barks, who lives in Athens, Georgia, soon went to work. "I made a free verse version in modern English," he says, believing that this form "is our strongest tradition." Though this method of translation is unorthodox, Barks says that he works hard "to stay true to Rumi's images, and, I hope, his spirit." He adds, "There's a musicality that is so dense—but I cannot do anything to transmit that. I listen for the pulse that comes through (the verses) and try to follow it, to get out of its way" and let it sing.

For seven years Barks worked on his translations, with little thought of publishing. Eventually, he sent the work to the American publisher, HarperCollins, which published an initial volume of Rumi. The unexpected success of this volume led to the extraordinarily popular *The Essential Rumi* and several other more recent titles by Barks. Together, these books have sold more than 500,000 copies, a huge popular success for a poet.

A poet and former literature profes-

trated in enclaves in the states of Iowa, North Dakota, Indiana and in the cities of Detroit and Pittsburgh. The Asian Exclusion Act of 1924 halted the immigration of Muslims until the immigration reforms of 1952 and 1965. In the 1960s many Asian immigrants reached the United States in pursuit of the "Great American Dream." There was a spiritual flowering as many gurus, Sufis and missionaries came in.

The new assumptions, attitudes and beliefs they brought generated debate. Sufism began to attract serious attention and found a niche in American society, although it actually had begun to make its presence felt from the early 1900s as an undercurrent in American aesthetics and spiritual life. Bohemians of Los Angeles such as John Cowper Powys had acquired reputations as connoisseurs of Sufism. Also, George Ivanovich Gurdjieff and Hazrat Inayat Khan from India presented Sufism in an idiom that modern American society could grasp easily. By the end of the 1960s, San Francisco was home to a large number

of Sufis, representing different spiritual orders.

Idris Shah's stories, reflecting the Sufi way of life, became popular on college campuses. American writers such as J.D. Salinger and Doris Lessing embraced it. Author Frank Herbert turned to Sufi spiritual melodies in his writings and movie star James Coburn, a member of a Sufi order, brought the culture to Hollywood.

The poems of Rumi, who lived from 1207-1273, had been known in academic circles through one English translation. But they became enormously popular after Tennessee-born poet Coleman Barks started translating them into modern English free verse. As Rumi's thought was being disseminated, his circles of devotees and the tradition of "turning" (or whirling dancing) also brought a new cultural perspective to the American "melting pot," although most Sufis in America are from the white majority.

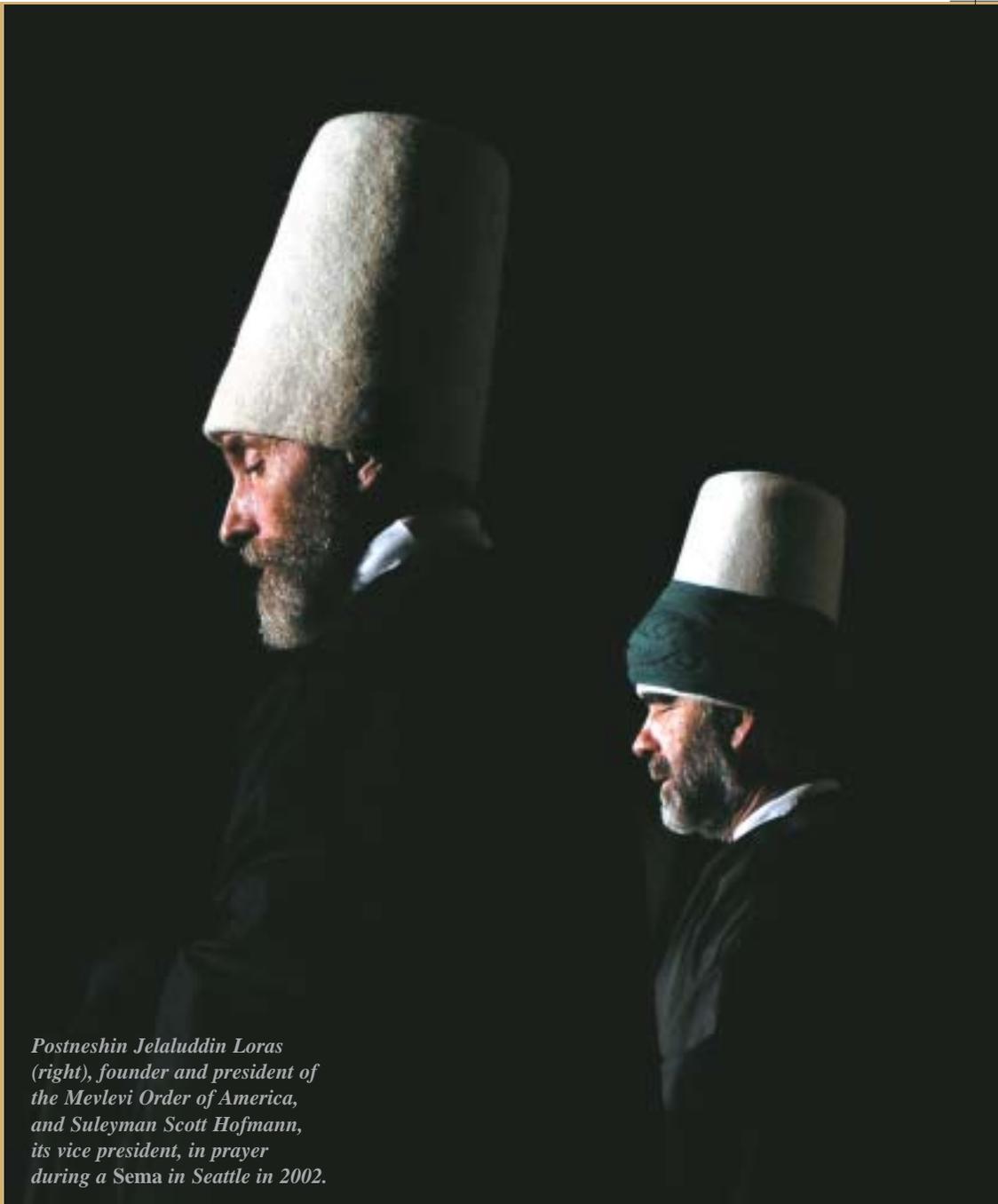
Suleyman Scott Hofmann of Seattle in Washington State is vice president of the Mevlevi Order of America and a *semazen*

sor, Barks speaks with enthusiasm and a sense of wonder when discussing the work of the great 13th-century poet. "It is poetry written by another part of the human psyche," he says, "not the personality," but something beyond it, transcendent. "He has a theology of laughter," says Barks, citing Rumi's Sufic tradition, adding that, in Rumi's view, "it may be that God is the impulse to laugh....Just to be in a body and sentient is a great joy," and that "he was talking of the core of the religious impulse, which is to praise—and maybe to laugh."

The potential for Rumi's works to bridge the gap between Americans and Muslims is not lost on Barks. "[Americans] are blind to a lot of things in the Islamic world. One of these things is Rumi. We don't fully understand the beauty of Rumi." He hopes, through these translations, to facilitate understanding, to "become an empty doorway" through which Rumi's poetry can enter, "to submit," he says, understanding that this willingness to submit is the very essence of Islam.

This sense of curiosity and joy, a desire to experience and understand, are characteristic both of Rumi and of Coleman Barks, and are now drawing together two disparate people with common spiritual yearnings. □

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Postneshin Jelaluddin Loras (right), founder and president of the Mevlevi Order of America, and Suleyman Scott Hofmann, its vice president, in prayer during a Sema in Seattle in 2002.

or turner, who says, "What is attractive to me about Sufism is that at its core is love. It is taught face-to-face, hand to hand, heart to heart. Because of the language barrier, the Mevlevi teachings have initially come to America in a very pure form," he says, "expressed by example, gesture....Ultimately, it is not an intellectual exercise, though every personal resource is used."

In the 1970s, Hofmann first saw "someone stand up in the dervish garb and turn in the center of a circle of people. Something inside said, 'I don't know what that is, but I recognize it in myself.' I just had to know what was behind it." Suleyman Hayati Dede, leader of the Mevlevi Order in Konka, Turkey, came to Canada in 1976, and sent his son, Jelaluddin Loras on a one-way ticket a couple of years later, to begin teaching the ceremony and the Sufi way. But Hofmann was in a different part of the country trying, with like-minded searchers, to learn to turn by studying pictures of whirling dervishes from a book.

"Of course, we didn't accomplish it," Hofmann says, "but we

were yearning to join in this beautiful ceremony that we were reading about." Eventually he met Loras and learned "there was a method, a step one, and step two and step three."

In America, "there was absolutely nothing that stopped me from searching, discovering anything I could about this," says Hofmann, "except the limitations of not knowing the language, not knowing the customs, not being able to read the literature in its original form, and not having living teachers available to study with. Those are a lot of 'nots.'" But no matter where one is, even in countries where the practice of Sufism is banned or restricted, Hofmann says, "there is no restriction to opening oneself to the essence of this teaching...because it's an inward journey."

The largest share of credit for popularizing Sufism in the West goes to Hazrat Inayat Khan, who brought musical, universalist Sufism from India to the United States in 1910. Although he began as a master of the Chishti Order, in America he trained people in the Naqshbandi, Qadiri and Suharwardi orders as well.

SUFI ORDERS IN AMERICA

QADIRI: founder Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, 1077-1166

Founded in Baghdad, reputedly first formally organized Sufi discipline. Ecstatic dance, wonder-working in some branches. Bawa Muhaiyadden best known Qadiri sheikh in North America.

CHISHTI: founder Muin ad-Din Muhammad Chishti, 1142-1236

Prominent in India, Pakistan, inclusive, universalist. Brought Sufism to Europe, North America. Hazrat Inayat Khan and son Pir Vilayat Khan best-known Chisti teachers in the West.

NAQSHBANDI: founder Muhammad Baha' ad-Din Naqshband, 1317-1389

"Sober" order, strong in Caucasus, Central Asia. Sheikhs in West include Nazim al Haqqani and Hisham Kabbani.

MEVLEVI: founders followers of Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi, 1207-1272

Turkish order, best known as "whirling dervishes," emphasis on "religion of love." Teachers in United States include Kabir Helminski, Jelaluddin Loras.

SHADHILI: founder Imam ash-Shadhili, 1196-1258

Founded in Egypt by a Tunisian, strong in North Africa. Western adherents emphasize Islamic tradition.

SHADHILI-ALAWI: founder Abu-l-Abbas al-'Alawi, 1869-1934

Branch of the Darqawis, founded by an Algerian. Frithjof Schuon traces his lineage to this order.

HELVETI-JERRAHI: founder Umar al-Khalwati, d. 1397

Turkish branch of Khalwatiyyah, teachings from several major orders. Grand Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak brought the order to New York. Present sheikhs in United States include Nur al-Jerrahi-Lex Hixon, Tosun Bayrak, and Ragip Frager.

NIMATULLAHI: founder Shah Wali Nimatullah, 1330-1431

Most widespread Shi'ite Sufi order, concentrated in Iran. Leader, Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, lives in London.

RIFA'I: founder Ahmad 'Ar-Rifa'i, 1106-1182

Central Asian influences, tendency to ecstatic dance some wonder-working, other branches sober.

QADIRI-RIFA'I: founder Muhammad Ansarai, circa 1900

Merging of Qadiri and Rifa'i, migrated from Baghdad to Istanbul. Sheikh Taner Vargonen leader in United States.

UWAYSI: founder Uways al-Qarani, 7th century

Devotees follow inner links to Uways al-Qarani, a contemporary of the Prophet Mohammad, rather than a formal discipline. Branch founded by Mir Qutb al-Din Muhammad Angha in the early 20th century spread to the West.

Based on material in *Gnosis* magazine.



Turners from the Mevlevi Order of America during the inter-faith Mystical Chant universal dance of peace in Seattle in 2002.

He told his disciples to follow the order that suited them, because all led to the same truth. After his death in India in 1927, the movement he led became Sufi Order International, headquartered in New York.

Among Khan's principal disciples was Samuel L. Lewis, who had been born into a Jewish family and became known as Sufi Ahmad Murad Chishti after Khan certified him in 1926 as a Sufi master, credited with the ability to initiate newcomers into Sufi discipline and train them to perfection. Lewis established a convent in San Francisco, where people from different religious denominations gathered. He died in 1971 at 75.

Another prominent disciple of Inayat Khan's teachings is Shabda Kahn, director of the Chishti Sabri School of Music in

California, which aims to spread the Sufi message of love through concerts. "Sufism is not about theories or the intellect so much as an experiential, body-based spirituality with many practices, using movement, the voice and music," says Kahn, a frequent traveler to India. In 2001, Kahn became the leader of Sufi Ruhianat International, which Lewis had started in San Francisco.

Sufism has attracted women in America in substantial numbers. One of the significant characteristics of the Mevlevi Order is its particular emphasis on introducing Sufism to the West with newer dimensions, including allowing women to participate in the mystic assemblies, says Maile Rietow, secretary of the order and wife of Loras, the leader or *postneshin*. "The *Sema* that we do in America is exactly the same as it is done in Turkey with the exception that we allow men and women to turn together," Rietow says. "This was also the case historically in Turkey, but not for several hundred years have men and women turned together publicly there. The original permission for women to turn in America was given by Postneshin Jelaluddin's father, Suleyman Hayati Dede."

Speaking from her home on the Hawaiian island of Maui, Rietow says she feels that Sufism "brings the sweet voices of the mysticism of Islam to the Western mind and heart, filling the emptiness there with love and gratitude." She adds, "As with all true paths, it offers a way out of the pain and confusion of separation brought on by materialism."

The dialogue between faiths that Sufism has initiated in multicultural America is the need of the hour, says Jay Kinney, editor of *Gnosis*, a journal of the Western inner traditions. Says Kinney, "If Sufism embodies the true essence of Islam, as many contend, then grasping what is attractive about Sufism may help us Westerners gain a more complete picture of Islam than the mass media usually provide." □

—Laurinda Keys Long contributed to this article